

Men's

Taking It Up a Notch

As more men embrace dressed-up looks, footwear buyers are ready to follow suit. Rather than seeking streamlined shoes that clearly have their roots in athletic, fashion-forward retailers are on the hunt for next-level shoes to serve as the perfect anchor for designer denim paired with a blazer. Fitting the description are looks that, while still sporty, have more substantial profiles, as well as luxe materials and details. On the business side, cautious optimism prevails.



Next, Cleveland and Akron, Ohio

Steve Silver, owner/buyer

Store count: 4 (average: 7,000 sq. ft.) **Open since:** 1995

Buying plan: "Athletic has been on fire, so to grow that business anymore is difficult. There's great opportunity in casual; it's underserved right now, especially with premium denim and preppy looks [so popular]."

Hunting for: "We're always looking for the next limited, exclusive product, the brand that's emerging on the Coast and in better chains."

Will stay away from: "Product that is overdistributed."

Strategy shift: "To be much more targeted and edited."

Hottest fall '05 brands: "Our two best vendors are Nike and Timberland — which has some incredible product coming down the pike. DC Shoes, on the urban side."

Lesson learned from fall '05: "There's this whole new excitement in action sports — a desegregation of urban and skate."

Year-end 2005 summary: "It started out great, but Q4 was very promotional. Weather is always an issue here in Cleveland."

2006 outlook: "It has to do with our presentation and really finding the products that are unique."

Next big thing: "Particularly in athletic, the artist collaboration and making each release special."

Off Broadway Shoe Warehouse, 14 states

Joel Pollack, men's footwear buyer

Store count: 41 (average: 2,300 sq. ft.) **Open since:** 1988

Buying plan: "To come out here and see who's being talked about."

Hunting for: "Athleisure has been around for a while, and I think it needs a little update. I'd like to see what the next evolution is."

Hottest fall '05 brands: "Børn Blast, a casual style, was tremendous for me, and we did well with some basic Timberland styles. We did well with Western, but in very limited quantities."

Lesson learned from fall '05: "Back in spring, everyone was screaming about sport lifestyle, and it did well at first, but in the fall it wasn't as explosive as we thought it would be."

Year-end 2005 summary: "I was nervous, but it worked out."

2006 outlook: "The jury is still out."

Trend with five minutes left: "Dress was hot for a while, but it's not so hot across the board anymore."

Next big thing: "Soft constructions to wear with jeans."

De La Sole, San Francisco

Joe Costa, co-owner/buyer

Store count: 1 (1,400 sq. ft.) **Open since:** 2003

Buying plan: "I look at what my staple brands are doing, but I also look for something new. I'm probably more closed off to a company that only does one thing. It's better for me if I can deal with vendors who will dabble in a variety of looks and styles."

Hunting for: "A sporty hybrid shoe."

Will stay away from: "Middle-of-the-road [styles], or a dress casual that's too mainstream."

From left: Next; Allen-Edmonds' Keene; De La Sole's Barry Schmell and Joe Costa; Timberland's Davit; Tsubo.

Strategy shift: "I want to beef up dress, but only if the styles are there."

Hottest fall '05 brands: "Tsubo, Medium and Gola."

Lesson learned from fall '05: "I've learned this before, but I learned it again in fall: Go with your gut."

Year-end 2005 summary: "Better than we expected."

2006 outlook: "I've got a pretty good feeling about it."

Trend with five minutes left: "The bowling shoe thing. Its five minutes are up, but I'm still seeing it out there."

Next big thing: "Guys are ready for color."

Boyd's, Philadelphia

Joel Jaffe, buyer/men's shoe department manager

Store count: 1 (48,000 sq. ft.) **Open since:** 1940

Hunting for: "We're a large department, so we cater to a lot of customers and we have many points of view. Fall tends to be dressier, but we'll be looking for shoes that cross categories."

Will stay away from: "I won't get real excited about boots. If you don't have cold weather, you sit with them."

Hottest fall '05 brands: "Gucci and Sergio Rossi."

Lesson learned from fall '05: "We have to keep evolving to understand the shoes that our new customers want."

Year-end 2005 summary: "Our shoe department was moved deeper into the store, so we have to develop traffic from other floors."

2006 outlook: "We're optimistic, and we're not backing off."

Trend with five minutes left: "How much is left in sneakers?"

Next big thing: "Will Western become as important for men as it has for women?"

Fly Mode, Ferndale and Royal Oak, Mich.

Joanne Dijkman, owner/buyer

Store count: 2 (average: 1,000 sq. ft.) **Open since:** 2004

Buying plan: "We like premium looks at an affordable price."

Hunting for: "We're trying to move more into lifestyle athletic."

Will stay away from: "What our mainstream competitors carry."

Strategy shift: "We're growing the [men's shoes] category. We haven't carried shoes for long, so we're spending more."

Hottest fall '05 brands: "Kenneth Cole Unlisted, 310 Motoring."

Lesson learned from fall '05: "The price ceiling was \$150."

Year-end 2005 summary: "It was a good year for our first time out with footwear."

2006 outlook: "We know more now; it's going to be stronger."

Next big thing: "Different and hard-to-get footwear like a limited-edition Nike or A Bathing Ape."

4 Men, Detroit

Mike Alpert, owner/buyer

Store count: 3 (average: 3,500 sq. ft.) **Open since:** 1992

Buying plan: "I'm looking for new styles that will work in urban

— something that is fresh and eye-catching."

Hunting for: "Boots. Brown shoes are very strong for fall."

Will stay away from: "Dress shoes."

Strategy shift: "Last year, I started going a little heavier into footwear and buying shoes not in the mainstream mall stores."

Hottest fall '05 brand: "Any Cole Haan."

Lesson learned from fall '05: "That we want to be the ones to start a trend rather than follow it."

Year-end 2005 summary: "It was the best year since 2001. We added more shoes to the mix, and it keeps the customer in the store and from going somewhere else."

2006 outlook: "I'm cautious because of the situation with GM and Ford and Delphi with the loss of jobs. I am worried about the economy in Michigan. Because of that, I like to give orders and then reorder."

Next big thing: "More casual, brown-shoe looks."

Rainsong Shoes, Northern Calif.

Levi Soderlind, owner/buyer

Store count: 3 (average: 1,000 sq. ft.) **Open since:** 1975

Buying plan: "I'm looking for more variety, from comfort to dress."

Hunting for: "We look for something that's light and has substance, but is still masculine. Our customer doesn't do much color."

Will stay away from: "We really avoid the shoes that are mass-produced. Our biggest brand for guys is Ecco."

Strategy shift: "We're buying a little more fashion."

Hottest fall '05 brands: "Definitely Keen and Tsubo."

Lesson learned from fall '05: "You can't worry about price, because if the shoe is comfortable and [customers] like it, they'll buy it."

Year-end 2005 summary: "It was our best year so far. Our men's following keeps growing."

2006 outlook: "I think it's going to be even better than 2005."

Trend with five minutes left: "Dress is less important."

Next big thing: "Sporty casual comfort like Keen and Tsubo."

Foursome, Minneapolis

John Herzog, buyer

Store count: 5 (average: 2,500 sq. ft.) **Open since:** 1940

Buying plan: "Buying closer to the season and doing fill-ins."

Hunting for: "Dressier fashion shoes."

Will stay away from: "Low-priced footwear. Shoes carry more status now."

Hottest fall '05 brands: "Timberland, Ecco, Cole Haan. Our best new vendor was Sandro Moscoloni."

Lesson learned from fall '05: "We had to react fast. When we had bad weather, they wanted boots — immediately."

Year-end 2005 summary: "It was a good year because we had good weather."

2006 outlook: "I'm very optimistic."

Trend with five minutes left: "Clunkier shoes for men."